DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 405 CS 216 561

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TITLE Why I Study Spanish.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; English Instruction; *English (Second Language); Foreign Students; Higher Education; Second Language Instruction; *Spanish; *Spanish Speaking; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

English teachers together with multilingual and multidialect students can create new standards for language use and learning in the classroom. A teacher of writing and ethnic studies finds herself telling her students "I still have time to learn Spanish." Many to whom she speaks these words are native speakers of Spanish, struggling in classroom discussions or in their writing to perfect standard English. Students have disarmed her typical classroom authority primarily through speaking Spanish. When their Spanish seizes English to enforce a collaborative model of instruction in classroom meetings the transformative power of this reversal compels the teacher to renew contact with "el espanol," if necessary, one word at a time. After receiving a notice that the teacher will be delivering a paper called "Why I Study Spanish" in April of the following year, she decides to start learning the language right then and there, vowing to construct a bilingual flashcard series and cart them around religiously. To confront her weaknesses as "la estudiante," she begins to infuse her teaching with multiple language use. The teacher invites her current composition class to showcase their multiple language use in their writing by using "code switching" between English and Spanish. The composition class can no longer be a place divorced from the realities of language use occurring in the concrete terrain that surrounds colleges and universities.(Contains 4 notes and 10 references.) (CR)

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ED 426 405

Why I Study Spanish.

by Pauline Uchmanowicz

Published:

1998-04

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Why I Study Spanish

I remember a postcard once sent to me by Jules Chametzky that closed with the line: "I still have time to learn Spanish." Since the author of this sentiment also wrote for an American Realism course he taught in 1980 the first gender-balanced, multi-ethnic reading list I encountered as a student of literature, I gave his idea of studying Spanish a turn in my own consciousness. I later made a feeble attempt *a estudiar español* through an adult education program but only lasted through a couple of classes. How Professor Chametzky fared in his pursuit of the language I didn't hear.[1] As for me, today a teacher of writing and ethnic studies, I find myself telling my own students: "I still have time to learn Spanish."

Many to whom I speak these words are native speakers of Spanish, struggling in classroom discussions or in their writing to perfect standard English, the "prestige language" (hooks) in the US academy. At an average age of around twenty, they seem to have all the time in the world, as do counterparts seated beside them; students from Japan, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, and Guyana, many reared in ethnic neighborhoods in nearby New York City. I picture us together in a composition course, the first in a two-part series. About a third of the students are "repeating" because the prestige language bested them at last semester's final exam, a departmental in-class essay. At the front of our room, lecturing in English on using and citing sources, I squeeze a dry erase marker, occasionally using it to write a key word on the wipe board. It's late spring, but the only open windows in the room stare out at the writers from computer screens that they sit before in respectful silence (save an occasional tapping of a keyboard), side by side in two neat rows. After twenty or so minutes I say, "That's it. I'm tired of talking about documentation," and direct them to begin working on a writing assignment.

Like crocuses bursting through soil an explosion of voices fills the air as students bunch up to collaborate, paraphrasing my instructions to each other bilingually. Or they joke and gossip about their private business, secure in that fact that I *no comprendo*.

CS 216 5-61

"Miss!" they call out, ordering me to their sides as they voluntarily revise their sentences under my watchful guidance *cuatro, cinco, seis* time. Students have established these participatory norms and disarmed my typical classroom authority primarily through speaking Spanish. Refashioned as an English-speaking island I float between their cyber continents, observing multiple-language use as an active process of teaching and learning. Encouraging these students to engage "diverse language and speech" and "to think of the moment of not understanding what someone says as a space to learn" (hooks 172), I am forced to acknowledge how the language of my own pedagogy (e.g., Toulmin logic) demands as much from them as a matter of course. But when their Spanish seizes English to enforce a collaborative model of instruction in our classroom meetings the transformative power of this reversal compels me to renew contact with *el español*, if necessary, one word at a time.

Months go by. Here's what I've done: looked up course offerings in Spanish for summer session, noting that the meeting times conflict with my own teaching schedule, and taken an unopened set of videotapes called *Destinos: An Introduction to Spanish* off my next-door neighbor's shelf and placed it still wrapped in the plastic on mine. In September a notice comes in the mail that I'll be delivering a paper called "Why I Study Spanish" in April of the following year. I decide to start learning the language right then and there, vowing to construct a bilingual flashcard series from the 3 x 5 index cards I plan to cart around religiously. My (like me) anglo colleague who mocks, "You're learning Spanish one word at time?" gives me my first: *palabra*. The leaves start to turn. I imagine myself modeling in reverse the rhetorical strategy of a grade schooler's paper I that year judge for a national arts contest. The child's paper begins *en español*, then moves through a mishmash of Spanglish to standard American English. When I bump into Spanish-speaking students from last spring's comp class they call out "*Miss*," and we kiss and hug like long-lost *amigos*.

Un día, I stop one of them, Wilma, in front of the Student Union and ask her to give me something for my flashcards.[2] A first-generation college student expected by her *familia* to serve as a role model to younger siblings, she rattles off, "*¿Que tu quieres saber sobre el español?*" What I want to know about Spanish at that moment is how to spell what Wilma just recited. In an English-inflected accent she dictates the phrase letter by letter as I follow her voice with my pen. "And remember, an upside down question mark goes at the beginning," she tags on *en inglés*. We are experiencing reversal on more than the punctuation level. For Wilma next corrects the printed phrase in her own hand and, thinking about how it will later appear on the screen of my word processor, I model the trust she put in edits I marked on her drafts for first-year writing. Rehearsing a narrative of our encounter to later share with my current comp class, I cast myself as a foreign learner respectfully nodding to the faith students place in my command of standard written English. Additionally, my story will honor multiple-language use and invite it in our classroom. I part from Wilma envisioning the composition classroom as a space where student use of multiple languages improves relations (e.g., student-student, student-teacher) and encourages knowledge-making in integral patterns.

My *leccións en español* move along. "*Simpatico* has no real translation," a friend reminds me; I look it up in Spanish and English dictionaries to test his claim of dissonance. At the teacher-training practicum I lead, a graduate student directs my eyes to "*la escalera*," *las palabras en español* it seems I just then notice on the cover of a book I'm teaching for the third time. When one of my Spanish-speaking students describes the conference we hold about his paper as "*bien bueno*," in English translation this turns out to mean: "We talked about what I did wrong." At this point I request from him *la palabra para "mal,"* because I'm feeling pretty darn lousy.

To confront my own weaknesses as *la estudiante*, I begin to infuse my teaching with multiple-language use. In writing theory class, lecturing on Saussure's linguistic sign, I draw a tree on the board and substitute *el árbol* for the English signifier. When I

introduce Saussure's concept to my current composition class in order to locate structures of social difference in the space between signifier and signified (Ebert), Ichiro comes to the board to assist me. He writes out the Japanese character for *tree* followed by its transliteration. The class moves from discussing the arbitrary nature of linguistic assignations to exploring cultural meanings we imbed in signs. To create material for our investigation, students first write down and then share various names, definitions, and images they have of *home*. We repeat the exercise several more times, testing out and questioning our multiple versions of *president*, *democracy*, and finally *welfare mother*. By using and sharing multiple languages in this way, students begin to identify how cultural differences shape our perceptions and values.

A phone call comes at the office a few mornings after and I immediately recognize the voice on the other end as Rosa, a student from last spring's comp class.

"¡*Miss!* This is Rosa! How are you Miss?" After hearing that I'm fine Rosa says, "I need help with a paper, Miss."

When I ask why she doesn't go to her current instructor, whom she and I both like as a person as well as respect as a teacher, there is silence on the other end. I say, "Come tomorrow. Maybe you'll teach me some Spanish."

During our conference we're feeling *simpatico*. Rosa is writing a paper on *Oedipus Rex* and is baffled by the Sphinx. I am writing a poem called "Egypt Beach, Massachusetts" that contains the lines: "My mind mixes *Sahara* with *tundra*/Like a sphinx singing lyrics/To *Oh Susanna!*" We discuss the paper and the poem. We make small talk, breaking from textbook English into sentence fragments. Rosa mumbles something about not coming back the next semester.

"¡*Miss!*" she stresses in her emphatic accent, "I'm gonna join the Marine Corps. I'm gonna go to boot camp. I thought your knew?"

"No," I say.

"That was already, before last semester, Miss."

I hear the word *bootstraps*, from a book by Victor Villaneuva, resonating around our sentences. Looming large in my memory's ear are his descriptions of childhood in the projects, followed by those of a getaway stint as a teenage draftee in Uncle Sam's army.

Rosa isn't the only student from our composition class who I won't be seeing around campus next semester. "Juan got kicked out of school," Sheliza tells me when she too comes for help on a paper about *Oedipus*. I wonder if my teaching contributed to Juan's dismissal because, listening to Sheliza describe her memories of our comp class, I know the students did not fail each other. She says, "Sometimes we were talking on email; sometimes we were doing other things [on the computers] besides writing our papers." Juan, who already was computer literate before enrolling in our comp section, tutored classmates in word processing and other computing skills. For instance, he sometimes combined spoken Spanish with key boarding techniques to teach others how to format in MLA manuscript preparation style. Though several students ended up failing Computer Composition I (for which I was the lead instructor), they all earned an "A" in Word Processing (largely led by Juan), a one-credit co-requisite to the course.

Days go by. I ask Lisa, a student worker in my department, to help me with my independent study. Writing out greeting phrases for me to memorize, *¿Como pasastes el dia*? and *¿Como le fue el dia hoy*?, she insists, "You have to learn the basics." *En inglés* she adds a translator's note: "'*Hoy*,' which means 'today,' is optional." We part ways, Lisa calling after me, "*¡Que pases un buen dia*!"

"That's not even used. That's too formal," an anglo friend later remarks on Lisa's lesson *en español*. I picture non-native speakers expected to start with "the basics" climbing *la escalera* of formal English literacy. What must it feel like to brave these stairs in the public arena of the classroom?

The question stays in my mind as I observe a colleague's Composition II class. Students call across the room to each other for help in translating their ideas from *el*

español into English, so that they may continue discussing "The Colonel," a poem by Carolyn Forché. I'm pleased to hear Wilma's voice among them. She proudly shows me a paper for which she has earned a high grade. I wish I could praise her *en español*, which reminds me of watching a videotape produced by a graduate student for a Spanish television program in the early 80s. He was stopping cars at a traffic light and, in English, asking drivers and passengers who rolled down their windows, "You want to say something in Spanish today?" "*Enchilada*," I imagine myself uttering for the camera; or better yet, "*no hablo, amigo.*"

Rosa, Sheliza, and I are still writing about the Sphinx. Midterm exams come and go. The day before Thanksgiving recess, email arrives in my box with the subject line: "hi, miss pauline." The message reads: "*Espero que comas mucho pavo.* (look it up in the dictionary) [signed] Rosa." I ignore the instructions, intending to figure it out on my own. Beyond *mucho*, which I already knew, I get as far as guessing *espero* is a verb form before asking someone to translate for me.

It's the last week of the semester and Rosa calls me. "Miss, I need to see you," she says. I'm overwhelmed with my current students, I tell her, and can't possibly help her with a paper. She shows up at my office anyway, and I'm ready to repeat our phone conversation. But all Rosa wants is to give me a present. At that moment, I remember a break-through essay Rosa wrote in our comp class in which she describes Three Kings, the day Latino children get their Christmas gifts. Eyes and face swelling with well-earned pride she handed the essay over like *un regalo*, announcing with a confident smile, "I'm getting better!"

In January, I'm reading Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* for the second time. The story of a Puerto Rican family's migration to Nueva York, Cofer's novel is laced with "code-switching" between English and *el español*. I convince myself that I understand *el español* better this time around, that I'm getting by without a dictionary.

Besides, Spanish-speaking students who will do a presentation on the novel in the ethnic literature class I teach surely will provide translations for lazy gringos like me.

When the day arrives in February, the Spanish-speaking presenters do not translate. "Get a Spanish-English dictionary and look the words up," they say, just as I demand students do when they don't understand words *en inglés*. They also discuss code-switching as a staple of Cofer's novel. It occurs to me that this technique helped canonical writers gain notoriety in the US. One need think only of how *nada*, the Spanish word for "nothing" used more than a dozen times in a single paragraph of the much anthologized short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," amounts to much in anointing the anglo Ernest Hemingway a "great writer." Could my first-year students wield more power in their writing if they negotiated language use through code-switching?

Over the next few days, I practice code-switching myself in the most pedestrian of ways. Unwrapping a new laser printer and following the packaging notes, I *coloque la etiqueta* that reads *quite el papel antes de volver a cargar* to the machine's paper feed. At the automatic teller I choose "*Español*" instead of "English." Reflecting on the ubiquity of code-switching in greater American culture, at home I thumb through "Students' Right to Their Own Language," a special issue of *College Composition and Communication* published a quarter century ago. By demanding that students use what the pamphlet calls "educated English" in speaking and "edited American English (EAE) in writing, "many of us [continue to teach] as though the function of schools and colleges were to erase differences" (2-5 passim). Indeed, because of historical and other factors prestige is "externally imposed" (not inherent) in what the authors term "standard" or "consensus" dialects, "and the prestige of a dialect shifts as the power relationships of the speakers shift" (5). Furthermore, twenty-first-century writing instructors who accept that "the history of language indicates that change is one of its constant conditions. . ." (8) must provide students with agency so they may take a conscious role in this history.[3]

When I arrive to our next class meeting I raise the idea of code-switching with my

current composition class, inviting them to showcase their multiple-language use in their writing. Several students present are repeating the class after failing the common final the previous semester; most of the repeaters know English as their second or third language. We are reading Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue," studying the way the author moves between her native Chinese and standard English. We discuss ways students who speak multiple languages might model Tan's strategy in their own writing.

For the next written assignment Ana drafts an essay about her birthplace, the Dominican Republic, and uses *las palabras "Quisqueya," "Hispaniola,"* and *"Puerto de Plata."* Ichiro code-switches between English and Japanese transliteration, describing his love of *tanka* poetry. James calls hip-hop DJs "turntablists," creating a prestige term from vernacular speech, and explains other technical vocabulary in his paper in a text-integrated glossary modeled on *Newsweek*'s "buzz-word" column. As Villanueva contends, the skillful bilingual and bidialectal "code-switcher is a rhetorical power player" who knows language isn't fixed (23), who "uses his knowledge of how language choices are interpreted in his community to structure the interaction so as to maximize outcomes favorable to himself" (quoting Keith Gilyard 23). The students who code-switch in their compositions are starting to write with added confidence and power.

Code-switching writing students likewise strike commonality with contemporary US writers who are transforming the landscape of consensus English. For example, Japanese-American writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging*, the story of three impoverished children struggling to survive on the island of Molokai in Hawaii, is narrated in what linguists call Hawaiian Creole English. Yamanaka received the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) Literature Award for the book in 1998 because the committee was "impressed with the ways in which *Blu's Hanging* challenges 'standard' English in its deployment of 'nonstandard' pidgin as a visceral language of beauty and pain" (Shea 34).[4] As Yamanaka states, "I am devoted to telling stories the

way I have experienced them—cultural identity and linguistic identity being skin and flesh in my body" (32).

My body feels winter drawing to a close. I haven't seen any Spanish-speaking students from last spring's comp class for awhile and have all but abandoned my studies in their language. During the first week of March, Wilma contacts me. "I'm sorry I haven't called you sooner," she says, insinuating by her tone that she hasn't done her patriotic duty by me in terms of *el español*. Maybe Wilma's feeling this way because she wants help with her history paper on US veteran Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a story about Vietnam that is also about the inability of language to convey the historical reality of war. This is the subject of Wilma's paper, which already she has taken through several drafts. I am amazed by, and proud of her perseverance, by the style and sophistication of her college-level writing. When she thanks me at the end of our conference, I've temporarily forgotten my school-yard bilingualism and ask for *la palabra en español* for "thank you." *Gracias*, Wilma writes down on a scrap of paper. I stare at the word on the page as her heels click down the hallway.

I'm still wondering about the inability of language to convey historical realities that exist in US classrooms. The demographics of our nation have shifted dramatically in the last quarter century, particularly since the second great wave of immigration during the 1980s. Consequently, as Mina Shaughnessy articulated in the late 1970s, students' levels of preparedness in EAE reflect variances in language use that now permeate the US. Our students confront "interacting influences" between vernacular and standard forms of English, including "the pleasures of peer and neighborhood talk, where language flows most naturally; the contagion of the media, those hours of TV and radio and movies and ads where standard forms blend with all that is alluring in society" (Shaughnessy 10). African-American satirist Ishmael Reed augments Shaughnessy's view in his novel *Japanese by Spring* (1993) by repeatedly pointing to demographic realities manifesting on US soil that will influence language and literacy in the coming century. For example,

his protagonist, an English professor named Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, "knew that if he couldn't learn Spanish and Japanese he'd be obsolete in the 1990s United States. [Because] unless they expand and absorb, languages die, and already English was hungry for new adjectives, verbs and nouns" (50).

Clearly, the composition classroom can no longer be a place divorced from the realities of language use occurring in the concrete terrain that surrounds colleges and universities. Charles F. Coleman reinforces this position in "Our Students Write With Accents" when he maintains that writing instructors across the disciplines should find "ways of examining our own discourses and recognizing student discourses" (499). One way he recommends we accomplish this goal is through the writing exercises we devise. For instance, he describes an assignment in which students "write a letter in the voice of a character from one story to a character in another story" (499), and he provides a sample in which a student chose to imitate the voice of a vernacular speaker of English.

My own initiation into *el español* has helped me take steps in the processes Coleman prescribes. I now recognize the "externally imposed" prestige placed on the consensus English I promulgate in my teaching, acknowledge students' abilities to use multiple languages, and create class activities and writing assignments that encourage students to interpose other languages and English. As a result of writing about my studies *en español*, an essay I now regularly assign first-year writers asks them to describe their initiation into a particular kind of literacy. When students choose to write about how they learned to speak or write in a second language, I encourage them to code-switch or to use vernacular phrases in their compositions. Students who elect to read such compositions to the class typically must translate for English-only speakers or for the "professor," thereby shifting power relations in the classroom.

English teachers together with multilingual and multidialectal students can create new standards for language use and learning in the classroom. This does not mean that college-level writing standards need be compromised. In fact, in my own experience

teaching the two sections of composition described in this essay as having large repeater populations, I witnessed the repeater pass rate on the common final exam jump from 78% in spring of 1997 to 93% in spring of 1998, after multiple-language use shifted from an informal to an inscribed part of classroom instruction. As these statistics suggest, encouraging diverse speech and language acts in writing instruction should not be read as an attempt to replace standard American English, but rather as an opportunity for as many voices as are gathered together to contribute to a shared new standard of literacy learning.

I think back to students who first seized power in our computer composition classroom through speaking Spanish. How I long for students in all the classes I teach to

> . . . feel enclosed again in the coded talk
> of friendship, that tall pagoda
> where companions can sit on pillows
> and observe the great China of life filing by
> and say whatever comes to mind. (Collins 14-18)

Meanwhile, until I finally enroll in Spanish 101, I'll continue to ask students to teach me bits of the language. Admittedly, what learning Spanish meant to Chametzky twenty years ago may not translate precisely to my version of studying *el español* in the late 1990s. But in recognizing and acknowledging Spanish and other multiple-language speakers, and in aspiring to make multiple-language use an active process in the composition classroom, I am learning that when my "students write [and speak] with accents" (Coleman) they have *mucho* to teach me.

Notes

[1] In 1995, Jules Chametzky earned the MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature Society of the United States) Award for Distinguished Contributions to Ethnic Studies.

[2] I wish to thank the students who have allowed me to quote in this essay from our spoken conversations, and from their exams and papers. Any errors in Spanish spelling, grammar, or usage herein are strictly my own.

[3] Alyssa, a teacher-in-training enrolled in my Contemporary Ethnic Literature of the US class during spring of 1998, explores code-switching in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* in her midterm exam and points to how the blending of languages creates new standards for English. Alyssa writes that the Korean-American narrator translates Korean transliteration into English, as in "*Gaen-cha-na* (it's okay)" and "*Yuh-gi ahn-juh* (come here and sit)" (266); but, since Spanish is well known in the US, when another character offers him *cerveza* (255), "he does not translate its meaning." Perhaps in fifty years, she suggests, Asian transliteration also will stand on its own amid English prose. For as the framers of "Students' Right to Their Own Language" remind us: "From its earliest history, English has borrowed words from the other languages with which it has come in contact . . . from sources too numerous to list" (15-16).

[4] The AAAS later took back the award amid complaints from some Asian-American academics that the book stereotypes the marginalized Filipino community in Hawaii. Meanwhile, "a *New York Times* review of *Blu's Hanging* referred to the 'sometimes inscrutable stream of pidgin,' and other reviewers have called for a glossary" (Shea 33). Since comments similar to those found in the *NYT* review carry reverence and prestige in relation to canonical writers such as James Joyce, I added Yamanaka's book to my 1999 syllabus for Contemporary Ethnic Literature of the US.

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